HUMPHREY'S FAIRY QUEEN

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PRIZE

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"He knelt to say his prayers."

HUMPHREY'S FAIRY QUEEN

BY

HON. ZOE PLUNKET

And Other Stories

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HUMPHREY'S FAIRY QUEEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE FAIRY'S PROMISE.

"LET go my cloak, Humphrey; do, dearie, and hurry on—there's a good lad. You have nearly choked me with the way you're tugging at me, and father'll be waiting for supper till we come." And Mrs. Clarke, with a sigh, shifted from one arm to the other the heavy bundle of clothes she was carrying, and trudged on more quickly than before through the sloppy lane.

Humphrey, in obedience to his mother's words, let go the long, blue, cloth cloak, at which, in truth, he had been tugging, as with stumbling steps he followed in her wake; but, far from hurrying on, his hobnailed boots clattered along after her more slowly than before, till, as he reached a low, rustic gate which opened from the lane into a prettily-kept flower-garden, he stopped altogether, and crouching down almost to the ground, peered in eagerly through the twisted bars. He had not peered long, however, before his mother's voice summoned him again.

"Humphrey! Humphrey!" she cried wearily, as she rested her bundle for a moment on the low wall at her side, "I'll tell father, surely, when I see him, how you loiter; and if I do, I doubt you will not loiter next time. What there is to hanker for in there, I cannot think, and yet it's as hard to get you past yon

gate as it is to drive my old Jimmy past a bunch of carrots."

What with the mention of his father's probable displeasure, and the suggested similarity between himself and his mother's attenuated old donkey, Humphrey raised himself upright, and giving just one more lingering look behind him, he helped his mother to raise her burden again, and the two trudged home together in silence.

His mother did not know what there was to hanker for in there—in beyond the high, closely-clipped hedge which surrounded the rectory gardens; and as she daily passed it by, with her thoughts, poor woman, full of careful provision for the future—the scarcity of milk, the high price of coal, the ominous holes in threadbare garments already mended and remended by her careful fingers—the flowers and the shrubs, and the gay blossoms to

be seen at a distance within the glass-houses, stirred up no longings within her heart, nor raised an envious desire in her mind. Half a dozen loaves of good white bread, or a can of frothing milk, had seemed greater treasures in her eyes than lapfuls of snowdrops or gay crocuses.

But Humphrey's heart and Humphrey's mind were different from hers. He had often heard from village companions wonderful legends of fairies and their beautiful abodes, and as day after day, on one excuse or another, he made his way up to the wicket-gate and gazed longingly through it, the pleasure-grounds within the clipped yew hedge seemed fairyland itself to him. The rector's little daughter, wandering about from bed to bed, picking a flower here and then another there, was surely no other than the fairy queen, the glass-houses were her palaces, the gardeners

her slaves, and the feathery pampas grass seemed to grow only to supply her with fairy wands to carry in her hand.

This very evening it had all looked more beautiful than ever as he watched little May Darrell sitting under the laburnum tree, the evening sun shining through the yellow blossoms, and throwing a glory round her to her very feet. No wonder poor Humphrey sighed as he ploughed along the muddy roads, and entered at last the smoky, crowded cottage which was his home.

In silence he seated himself at the table spread for supper, and received the threatened reproof for idleness and loitering, and then in silence he crept into the corner of the large, rickety bed allotted to him, to indulge at first in romances, whispered to himself, of flowers and fairies, wonderful enough, it is true, but which

gave way in turn to dreams more strange and fanciful still.

Some days passed away before Humphrey, with the fear of his father's displeasure hanging over him, could creep away unobserved to feast his eyes with a view of the rectory garden. Indeed, he was almost in despair at no opportunity arising, when, to his great delight, one afternoon, as he was sitting on a bench outside the cottage door dancing his little baby brother into good temper on his knee, he heard his mother's voice calling to him from within, and as she took the baby from his arms, she bade him smooth his hair and brush the dust out of his jacket, as she had a parcel for him to carry to the housekeeper at the rectory.

An hour or two later in the afternoon, as May Darrell was sitting on her favourite seat under the laburnum tree, deeply engrossed in a new story-book, she was

startled by hearing the rustic gate hastily opened, and then in a moment more by a loud sigh almost in her ear. She turned round quickly at the sound, and saw the figure of a little boy, apparently about her own age, standing close beside her under the shadow of the tree.

At first she did not recognize him, but with a second glance, the remembrance of seeing Humphrey's pale face and strangely blue eyes in her father's class in Sunday school came to her mind; and closing her book, she asked him kindly whether he had any message to leave with her for the rector. But Humphrey, at the sound of her voice, seemed to waken from the dream or trance in which he stood, and, blushing crimson over face and ears, he dived under the branches of the laburnum, and out through the wicket-gate into the lane.

May was very much surprised, but at

the same time amused, at his discomfiture; and wishing to find out what it meant, she threw the book aside, and ran after him across the grass, till she found him hiding in among the bushes and long grass, about a stone's-throw from the rustic gate.

"Come here," she cried, as, finding he had been discovered, he came shyly out into the lane. "Come back, little boy, and tell me what you wanted with me here."

But Humphrey, making no answer, and remaining stolidly silent, May was beginning to retreat, walking backwards towards the garden, when, with a sudden instinct, she seemed to fathom Humphrey's thoughts.

"I know what it was," she cried. "You wanted to see the garden, and all the pretty flowers in it. I am sure that must be it. Come here and tell me if I am right."

Humphrey, as an answer, blushed a deeper crimson still, only indicating by the hungry way in which he turned his eyes in the direction of the garden that her suspicions had been correct.

"Come, then," she said, as she looked at a tiny little watch which was hanging at her side; "if you make haste I shall just have time to show you all before I must go back into the house;" and re-entering at the wooden gate, she waited until Humphrey was fairly inside, and then pushed it to.

With flushed cheeks and wide-open eyes, and with his hands thrust awkwardly within the pockets of his trousers, Humphrey followed the little girl as she led him up and down the gravelled walks, pointing out to him the different flowers as they went, and then on through a cool, dark fernery to the glass-houses filled with scarlet and white camellias and the

pure-blossomed primulas. And not a word said Humphrey all this time—not a word even when, dazed and bewildered by all that he had seen, he halted again at the garden gate; and yet little May seemed amply satisfied, as though she understood and approved of the admiration conveyed by his demeanour.

"Now I must go," she said at last, and then she paused. "I should like so much to give you some of these flowers to take home with you, little boy." Here she paused again, while Humphrey's heart thumped with expectation to know what her next words would be. "I should like to give you some very much, but papa never allows me to do so without asking his leave, and I have none of my own—my very own—but what grow here," she said, pointing with her finger to a narrow border skirting the yew hedge. "The snowdrops, you see, are

all withered. There is nothing in it now but violets, and they are not in blossom yet," and she stooped and searched for a minute or two among the thick green leaves. "They will flower very soon," she said, as Humphrey, cap in hand, backed out from the pleasure-grounds—"in a week at the furthest; and then if you come up I will give you a whole large handful for yourself, and such beauties as they are you cannot think. Mind you come and get them." And waving her hand to him as she spoke, she turned away from him and crossed the grass to the laburnum tree.

Humphrey watched her with a kind of fascination as she stooped to pick up her book from the ground, and then passed on through the conservatory into the house; at last, with a sigh expressive of very conflicting feelings, he turned his back on the rectory gardens and pursued his way home.

In a week, only one short week, he was

to come again, and she would give him a handful of sweet violets for himself—the fairy queen would give him flowers from fairyland; and he, little Humphrey Clarke, should have them for his own. With such an assurance as this before him, it is not to be wondered at that everything seemed to be passing in a dream around him, and that reproofs at his long-delayed absence and threats of future punishment fell for the time on heedless ears.

One week—only one short week—were the last words whispered by Humphrey to himself that night, as, curled up in his corner, the events of the day passed and repassed a hundred times before his mind, till he fell fast asleep, happily unconscious, poor child, of the trouble and anxiety which, before that week was over, should have fallen upon the inhabitants of the cottage.

When Humphrey awoke next morning, he had to sit up in bed and rub his eyes and blink them very vigorously for some time before he could quite take in the meaning of what he saw. It was not very early, he knew, for the town clock was just striking nine, and yet his mother was lying still in bed, feebly trying to hush the baby, whose cries had wakened Humphrey. The shutters of the little window had not yet been opened, and it was his father who was setting the breakfast on the table and coaxing the fire to burn brightly. And then, as Humphrey fidgeted about to find his garments, his father came over, and whispered to him how wee Hugh had been very ill all night, and the mother herself was sick too and tired, and he must be a good boy, and rise and give a helping hand at setting things straight.

So Humphrey rose, and for that day

and many days afterwards he had but few leisure moments to think of anything but the care of his sick mother and the poor little baby Hugh. His father and his elder brothers must be out betimes to earn the money to pay for medicines and the many things necessitated by heavy illness, and Humphrey had to learn how to be useful. He was the one to get the tea ready for father before he went to his work in the morning, and again when he came home, tired and anxious, in the evening; he grew quite skilful in sweeping the room and holding the baby, while a friendly neighbour would look in to "fix" his mother, as she called it, for the day; and then, as the hours passed on and she tossed restlessly about, he would turn the pillows, and fetch her a mug of fresh spring water, or sit beside her and read to her, with all the trustful faith of a little child, a few words from the

large-print Testament he had gained as a prize.

Yet, busy as he was, whenever his mother dozed and there came a lull in the cottage, his thoughts would turn with a longing to the appointed meeting in the rectory gardens, and how it could be accomplished. The smell of the violets would surely do his mother good, he thought, and make the whole room sweet and fresh, if he could only leave her long encugh to fetch them; and besides this, if he did not go, little Miss May, with her long, golden hair, would be expecting him, watching for him perhaps, he thought in his simplicity.

So the long-watched-for day came at last, but with it seemed to come no help, no hope of carrying out his cherished plan. His mother, still in bed, was weak and languid, the baby fretful, and the friendly neighbour, Mrs. Hughes, had

failed to turn in as usual; so Humphrey was busier than ever—so busy, indeed, that he had had no time to fret all the long morning. But as the day began to turn, the cottage grew very still, and his mother seemed to be easier than she had been for two or three days past; the baby, wonderful to say, had succumbed to his violent rocking of the cradle, and had fallen asleep, so Humphrey had time now to think of his disappointment. The sun, in spite of the closed shutters, had found out all sorts of queer ways of forcing itself into the room, and was shining right into his face. Always pale, he was paler now than ever after a whole week's watching and confinement in the stuffy room; he felt tired too, and his head ached, and as he leaned it against the wooden cradle, and thought of the pleasant, spring-scented air and green leaves outside, the tears came into his eyes, and

fell down in patches on the black hearth-stone at his side. His reverie had lasted so very long that it had almost changed to sleep, when he was roused by the click of the outside gate, and in a minute more Mrs. Hughes's jolly, smiling face appeared at the door.

"Well, laddie," she said, in her loud, cheery voice as she entered, "and how are all to-day? I could not manage to get away till late;" then, hushing her voice as she peeped into the cradle, and noticing the boy's downcast appearance, she continued kindly, "Why, Humphrey, you look as blay and downy very nigh as those that are sick. Run out, lad, and take a turn at the hockey sticks along with the village chaps out there; maybe 'twill put a pinch of colour in your cheeks."

Humphrey only shook his head, and pointed expressively with his finger first to his mother and then to the cradle.

"Hoot, man," laughed Mrs. Hughes under her breath, as she clapped her hand down heavily on his shoulder. "I suppose you think nobody knows how to rock a cradle but yourself. Run away out there," she continued, raising her voice a little. "I can stay here for a while, now that I'm come; and if you don't feel just spry enough in yourself for a game of hockey with yon rough fellows, there's my Johnny going out to fetch the cows home, and he'd be glad enough, I'm bound, to have a bit of company."

Humphrey did not seem much inclined to follow Mrs. Hughes's advice. He got up from beside the cradle, and crept over to the bed to see whether his mother was asleep; but as he leaned over her she raised her hand, and stroked his face lovingly.

"Do, dearie, run away out and get a breath of the sweet air; you're pale, my

lamb, and it will do you good." Humphrey made no answer, but pressed the thin fingers down over his face again. "Do, darlin'; Mrs. Hughes will bide here with me till you're back, and the child's asleep and all," and Mrs. Clarke drew down his face and kissed it.

Humphrey did not know what had come over him this afternoon, he felt so queer, for at his mother's words the tears rushed into his eyes. He kissed her again and again in return; and then, watching till Mrs. Hughes's back was turned, that she might not a second time remark upon his looks, he slipped round the wooden table and out into the open air.

For a moment he paused on the threshold, but it was not in hesitation whether to join the village chaps playing at hockey on the green, or to accompany Mrs. Hughes's Johnny on his walk to the grazing fields; no, it was but for a second, to

swallow down the rising sob, and then away he went down the village street, along the highroad, and into the green, budding lane, without a stop, without a halt even, till he drew breath beside the yew hedge, and leaned his throbbing head upon the rustic gate.

The sun was shining gloriously down, so gloriously that Humphrey felt almost dazed, as he stood with its rays slanting right upon his eager face. At last the time so eagerly looked forward to had come, and he was here—his hopes were fulfilled, his desire almost accomplished; and yet, and yet, as he stood there clinging to the wooden supports, there seemed to come a sudden hush of disappointment over everything.

The greensward lay smooth as velvet before him, the feathery pampas grass stood tall and graceful close at hand, the yellow laburnum tassels were swaying

gently down almost to the ground in the breeze, the fairy palaces were there intact, yet the blue eyes turned searchingly round for something more than these.

Why was there no one standing to watch for him in the yellow sunshine? Where was the handful of gathered violets he had been promised? Why was there such a stillness and oppression over everything? The house stood handsome and imposing just away a little to the left. A few of the windows on the ground floor had been thrown open, and the muslin curtains flapped lazily out into the wind, as from time to time some door was opened within; but most of them were closed and shrouded with the long white blinds. All was still, horribly still, and it was to break this silence that Humphrey at last, with a daring hand, pushed open the wicket-gate, and stood within the enchanted ground.

CHAPTER II.

AN ACCUSING CONSCIENCE.

MAY DARRELL had been right; one week of spring showers and bright sunshine had brought the violets in the narrow border skirting the yew hedge to their full perfection, and there they were now lying in profusion at his very feet; the smell from the purple and white blossoms seemed delicious beyond all his imaginations, and he was fain to throw himself down on the path beside them to revel in their sweetness.

Poor little waif and wanderer into fairyland, why was there no good fairy near to touch him with her wand, and

beckon him away from dangerous ground? Why was the little sovereign of these gay domains not present to fulfil her promise and save him from temptation? Yet, had Humphrey taken but a moment just to pause, he would have remembered One always beside him, whose hands are ever stretched out to help those that are weak, and in whose strength he would have surely conquered. Alas! with a suddenness and power which came upon him in an instant, and against which he made no effort at resistance, a craving to possess some at least of those glossy leaves and shining petals rose within him. He gave but one hasty, searching glance round in all directions, to see that he was safe from view, and then, with trembling fingers and nails, dug deep into the yielding mould; a handful of the plant—leaves, blossoms, roots and all—was torn from its companions, and

conveyed to the dark recess within Humphrey's jacket.

A guilty conscience lends wings to fearful feet, and out through the wicket-gate and down the lane, like a leaf before the wind, Humphrey darted, never pausing till safely out upon the highroad; then, as he neared his home, his steps slackened in their speed, and the inevitable feeling of remorse which follows on wrong-doing seemed with every step to grow more heavy.

But just now he had not time to think it out; he had only a confused feeling of having faltered from the right way, which made the blood throb painfully through his temples, and added weariness to his steps. But when he reached the cottage he found that Mrs. Hughes had been obliged to return to her own business, and his mother was wearied out with her efforts to hush the fretful baby; so

Humphrey had but a minute to cram his violets into a broken flower-pot, and hide them away in the cupboard under the dresser. Then, rinsing the mud off his hands in the tub of water outside the door, he hurried in to take the baby in his arms, and pace with it up and down the room till its good-humour was restored.

But shame and contrition were fast gaining possession of his mind—gaining strength with every moment as it passed. When the lights were out and the cottage quiet, and he had crept away to bed, he could not sleep, but all night long he lay awake, counting hour by hour as it was proclaimed by the village clock, thinking, sorrowing—yes, and praying too over the events of the past day, for Humphrey's was a tender little heart, and the deed he had done seemed in his eyes a grievous thing. It was in vain he tried to sleep;

he tossed and turned and sobbed out his grief, under the coloured counterpane, that he might not disturb his mother, or attract his father's attention, and watched with feverish eagerness for the morning, when he might with the earliest opportunity return his stolen treasures.

With the morning, however, came duties which could not be laid aside; and then—he did not exactly know how, but he supposed it was in consequence of his wakeful night—he fell asleep as he sat on the floor beside the cradle, and slept on the whole day long, only wakening up in the evening dusk. The next day again he felt so tired, so utterly wearied, he could scarcely drag himself about to help his mother, as for the first time she was able to sit up in the wooden chair by the fire; and again he fell asleep with his head resting against her knee, and strange pictures floating before his eyes. After

that there came a blank—a long, long blank; for Humphrey was ill now—so ill that his sickness seemed to be unto death.

How little were those who watched beside him able to divine the thoughts which crowded and hurried so eagerly through his mind; how utterly were they without a clue to the distress and unrest which oppressed him as he turned and turned again to try to escape from the scenes which haunted him! Always down upon his knees among the violets, grubbing with his nails deep into the damp ground, he would grope in his imagination till his back ached and his legs were cramped beneath him; or, with the gathered flowers in his hand, he would rise and try and try to get away out through the rustic gate, pursued for ever and ever by Miss May herself.

How long this all lasted he had no idea; he took no heed of days or hours as they

went by, but only felt that as the time passed on he grew more weak and weary, till it seemed to him that he could only lie upon the green grass of the rectory garden too tired to move, while round and round him, and in and out through the trees and flowers, the little girl kept flitting about, never coming close enough for him to look her in the face, or whisper to her his long-pent-up confession.

But at last there came a day when the scene seemed changed, and again he was standing at the wicket-gate, peering in through its twisted bars, and little Miss May was coming down the walk to meet him, looking like a fairy queen indeed, with the sun glittering on her white dress, and on two beautiful wings formed from the golden blossoms of the laburnum tree. She was carrying in her hand a bunch of violets, and as she waved them to him they seemed to perfume the whole air

around. He reached out his hand to take them from her, but as he did so he became dimly conscious of voices talking in subdued tones beside him. He heard his name mentioned in a familiar voice, and somehow, and by slow degrees, he realized that he was lying in the corner of the old four-post bed, and that the rector and his mother were sitting together close at hand.

He closed his eyes again after just one glance round to try to find out how much had been a dream. In that one glance, momentary as it was, his eyes had fallen on the cracked flower-pot upon the dresser with the green leaves peeping just above it; but it was not from these the perfume of violets came which was haunting him even still. Too tired to follow out his thoughts, he listened in a dreamy way to the rector's voice, as he first read and then knelt beside the

wooden table and prayed, and Humphrey heard his own name mentioned in that prayer.

Then there came a pause, and his mother's voice came again distinctly upon his ear—"Good-evening, sir, and I'm sure I'm much obliged to you for calling, with so many sick to visit, and with trouble of your own to keep you at home."

Humphrey was not dreaming now, for his eyes were wide open, and he could see the rector's figure standing in the doorway, with the bright light falling on his silver hair.

"Good-evening," he replied; "I will try and see you again as soon as I am able, but that may not be for a few days. Indeed my little girl seemed so far from well to-day that I should not have left her; but she gave me no peace till I promised to gather these violets with my own hand, and bring them down

myself, to give them to your little son, to whom she promised them some time ago."

"I'm sure I'm grateful to you, sir, both to you and her, for all your kindness; and so would he too, poor creature, had he the wit to know it," and poor Mrs. Clarke turned away, and covered up her face in her hands.

Humphrey shut his eyes, and pressed his crimson face deep down into the pillow. He heard his mother sobbing for a little while beside the fire, and then she came and leaned over him, and stroked his hair, and laid something—he knew what it was—close beside him, so close that the sweet air seemed almost to stifle him; and yet, when his mother was not looking, he stretched out his trembling fingers and took the flowers in his hand.

So the little girl had not forgotten him; and she was ill, very ill—that he

had plainly heard. She had not broken faith with him, but remembered and fulfilled her promise. What would she say now when she heard what he had done? How could he ever tell her, and yet how could he go on living and not tell her?

And so the days went on till Humphrey was better—not well, but still well enough to sit out in front of the cottage door for an hour or two every day, looking like the wraith of his former self, his face white as his mother's apron, and his hair, grown long during his illness, falling limp over his forehead.

He was not happy yet, though daily, as he knelt to say his prayers, he had laid his burden before God, and humbly asked for His forgiveness; yet till he had made a confession to some one else, till he had returned to her the treasures robbed from her garden, he felt that the cloud still

remained upon him. He had not told his mother yet the story of his violets, and as each day she watched the drooping plants, she never suspected the cruel fear he felt lest she might question him about them; but to his joy she never seemed to notice them particularly. They had come just in the hurry and confusion of his illness, and she had been too occupied and anxious to inquire by whose hand they came.

More anxiously still he avoided the slightest allusion to the rector or little Miss May. Till all was straight between them and him, he could not bear the mention even of their names; and strangely enough, though Humphrey did not think of this particularly till long afterwards, his mother did not seem to wish to speak about them either; and more than once, when a chance neighbour began to approach the subject, Mrs. Clarke, with

ready tact, would manage to change the conversation.

Another day and then another rolled by before Humphrey had gained the strength or found the opportunity of doing that which he so longed to do; but one afternoon, when he had been sitting as usual, quiet and unoccupied, sunning himself in the warm corner outside his mother's cottage, a sudden determination seized him to try whether this very day he could not make his way, even though it might cost him pain and weariness, as far as the precincts of the rectory.

The cottage was still and quiet within, and there was no one to take note of what he did, for his mother had taken the baby with her out of doors, while she fetched the clothes home from the bleaching-green; so, happy in escaping all questioning, Humphrey mounted on a wooden

chair, and lifted the violets from the broken flower-pot on the shelf.

It was the first time he had taken them in his hands since the day he plucked them, and now it was with a sad remorse he looked at their sickly, blossomless appearance. No fragrant smell or purple petals were to be found. Roughly transplanted from the soft mould and fresh open air to the close, fever-tainted cottage atmosphere, they had pined and drooped, so that Humphrey found it hard to recognize them. He did not care to look at them a second time, but, drawing his cap determinedly down over his eyes, he sallied out.

Weak as he was, and much as his timid nature shrank from the telling of his story, Humphrey went bravely along down the village street, and along the highroad, though the way seemed to have doubled in length since last he had been on it; and when he stopped, as he

had to do very often, to rest and draw his breath, his knees trembled and shook from feebleness.

He went bravely on till the lane was left behind, and he was standing again beside the rustic gate, peering in through the twisted bars; and then, bravely still, he pushed it open, and stood within, upon the gravelled path. How beautiful it all seemed in the soft freshness of the spring afternoon, the sun gleaming down upon the long rows of glass-houses, making them glitter and take strange colours like precious stones, the flower-beds rich with sweet and gay-looking blossoms! A lark was singing high up above him in the blue sky, and the thrushes and blackbirds were piping to each other all around. The yellow laburnums alone hung brown and shrivelled on the tree, and there was no little May Darrell sitting on the seat beneath it.

No, she was not there, as she had been on that day when he had seen her last, with the yellow sunshine falling on her hair; but some one else was there, whose kindly eyes and face, so grave and gentle, filled Humphrey's heart at once with a strange calm and courage. It was the rector himself, looking away from and beyond the scene immediately at hand to the graceful outline of the hills which bounded the horizon; an open book was lying unheeded on the seat beside him, its pages flapping softly over one another in the sunshine. As Humphrey stood beside him, his eyes seemed to wander slowly back from contemplating the land that is very far off, and to fall for a minute or two on the little figure without realizing his presence.

But the small face, bleached with illness, and the questioning eyes raised to his, touched a chord within the kind

heart, and roused him from his dreaming with a start. "You are Humphrey, are you not—Humphrey Clarke, that was so ill? Why, child, what brings you here to-day? Sit down and tell me," and Mr. Darrell tried to take his hand and draw him nearer to himself.

But Humphrey took no notice of the kindly movement. The battle he was fighting with himself was a hard one; if he faltered for a moment he might lose it altogether. "I want Miss May," he said. The words burst out with a vehemence which showed how hard it had been to say them. "I must see her just for a moment to tell her something."

The story once begun, Humphrey took no heed of the anguished face before him, or the hand upraised to check him.

"Oh, let me see Miss May!" he pleaded—"just for one minute. These flowers are hers," he added, crushing the

violets into the rector's hand; "I took them from her garden once, and now—now they're faded, but I've brought them back again."

All poor Humphrey's strength had failed him here, and with a sob that broke from lips as white as paper, he fell down on his knees, and leaned his head upon the wooden seat.

More than once as he was kneeling there the rector leaned forward and his lips moved as though to speak; but the silvered head was bent low again, the eyes shaded close with trembling fingers, and it was Humphrey's voice that broke the silence first. "She told me I might come again," he sobbed, in full confession; "and when I came she was not there; and then I took them, and I could not come again till now. May I not see her, just to tell her how it was?"

The rector raised him from the ground,

making him stand beside him at his knee; he parted the hair from his forehead, and laid his hand upon his head as though in blessing, and then he looked into his eyes until their dimness was reflected in his own.

"You want to see my little May," he said; "and I," he added yearningly, "would give all I have—yes, doubly all—to give one look into her face again; and yet we may not do this. She is not here, Humphrey; she is risen."

Too much awed by the strange sadness in the rector's voice to make any reply, Humphrey could only turn his eyes and follow his companion's longing gaze into the blue arch high above them. Then Mr. Darrell whispered into Humphrey's ear—

"There is a land of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign;
Infinite day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain.

"There everlasting spring abides,
And never-withering flowers;
Death, like a narrow sea, divides
This heavenly land from ours."

Humphrey was beginning to understand it at last—his dear Miss May was now indeed no fairy queen, but one of the holy ones in God's sight; and still he did not realize it all till, the rector leading him by the hand, they entered the peaceful little churchyard together, and planted at the foot of the pure white stone which bore her name the plant of fading violets.

Thus given back, and watered by tears of repentance, such as are precious in God's sight, the drooping leaves revived, and the sweet blossoms came again; and Humphrey, conscious of the rector's full forgiveness, and trustful of a higher pardon still, felt peace and happiness spring up once more within his heart.

THE SLATE IN THE FIRE.

"AH! here is grandpapa at last; I thought he never would come. Certainly I shall not be sorry to go home, after the dull afternoon I have had;" and Lucy Seaton, a little girl of about eleven years old, as she uttered this not over-polite speech, came away from her post at the window, and proceeded to put on the warm jacket which lay on the table beside her.

Now, though Lucy spoke these words in a low voice, and did not address them to any of her companions in particular, she fully intended that they should be

heard, and that they should convey to her listeners that she had been very much dissatisfied with the amusements of the day.

Nor did her friends seem to be in better sorts than she was herself. Flora and Emma Hargrove, the children of the house at which Lucy had been only spending the day, were standing on the hearth-rug, opposite the fire, looking sadly enough into the blaze. Fanny and Grace Day, school-fellows of theirs, and friends also of Lucy Seaton, were walking silently hand in hand round a half-dismantled Christmas-tree; while two other little girls, younger than the rest, were seated in a distant window, turning over the pages of a large scrap-book, and whispering their remarks to each other in a cautious undertone.

Altogether they were not a cheerful party, though what had caused their dis-

content it would not have been easy to discover at a glance.

True, it was a cold and cheerless afternoon out of doors, with a bleak wind whistling round the corners of the street, and shaking the newly-fallen snow from the trees in the square opposite; but indoors there were warm carpets, warm curtains, and a blazing fire glowing on rosy cheeks. The poor little children outside might have a good excuse for sad looks, as their bare feet pattered along over the frozen pavement, leading them back to homes where there were no fires to warm them, or no food to satisfy their hunger; but Lucy and her friends had not this excuse to offer.

Neither could they have complained that the reason of their remaining thus idle and unoccupied was that there was any lack of something to amuse them, for books and toys and games of all kinds lay

scattered in profusion over the tables and chairs, and even on the floor. No, that was not it. The real cause of their silence and gloomy inaction we may perhaps discover, if we watch Lucy Seaton for a little longer, and follow her and her grandpapa on their way home. The last glove was on, and the veil was tied closely across her face, when, after rapping with his stick against the door, the old gentleman entered the room.

"Well, young ladies," he said cheerily, as he came in and shook hands with them all, one after the other, "how are you to-day? Tired with your play, eh?" he inquired, as at a glance his quick eye saw that something had gone wrong. "I thought Miss Lucy would dutifully have come to meet me at the door, and have saved me from mounting up these steep stairs; but I suppose blindman's-buff, or something of that kind, had too great

charms for her. Was that it, little one, eh?" and as he spoke he turned with a smile to where Lucy had solemnly taken up her position beside him, and pinched her slyly on the cheek.

At Mr. Seaton's pleasant, heartfelt words the clouds seemed to clear away from off the brows of his little companions; the children in the window came from their retreat, and spread their picture-book across his knees; Fanny and Grace left the Christmas-tree, and perched themselves one on each arm of his chair; while Emma and Flora described to him the number of their presents and new-year's gifts.

And during all this time Lucy stood beside her grandpapa, awkward and ill at ease, till, as he got up at last and said good-bye, she gave an audible sigh of relief, and followed him quickly out of the room.

Lucy would probably have felt still more uncomfortable had she been able to peep back once again into that same room, ten minutes after her departure from it, and had she seen how much happier her friends were without her company. There was not a cross look now on any face, nor a sad one either; all seemed quite cheerful and gay. The candles on the Christmas-tree had been relighted, and after joining hands and dancing merrily round it two or three times, Emma and Flora proceeded to distribute among their friends the various articles which ornamented it.

But Lucy knew nothing of all this, as she walked along silently beside Mr. Seaton, slipping more than once on the slides made by thoughtless boys upon the pavement, till her grandpapa, taking her by the hand, roused her from her reverie, as he said,—

"Why, little girl, what has happened to you? Is your tongue quite frozen up, that you have not a word to say to me—no account to give me of your afternoon? What did you all play at?"

"Different things," replied Lucy shortly.

"Well, I suppose so," said Mr. Seaton, taking no notice of Lucy's unwillingness to answer him; "it would have been very dull to stay all the time over one game. But how did the Christmas-tree go off? I saw a grand one standing at the end of the room."

"It was a very grand one," replied Lucy, "and I should have liked very well to have got something off it; but the girls were so unkind about it, and managed it so badly, it all came to nothing."

"Why, how can that have been?" asked Mr. Seaton, much perplexed.

"Because—because Flora said I was unfair—at least, I said she was unfair in

the way she gave out the numbers, and then she would not do it my way, and of course I wouldn't have it her way, and then I said I wouldn't play with them, they were so unkind; so they blew out all the candles again, and we had no tree."

This speech had not been made without the accompaniment of several sobs, and at the end the hot, long-restrained tears were running down her cheeks.

Mr. Seaton walked on in silence. He knew the Hargroves very well, and felt sure there could have been no real unkindness or unfairness on their parts; and he knew, too, alas! how often before now Lucy had brought much trouble on herself by being cross and overbearing with her friends. He loved his little grandchild very dearly, and it grieved him deeply to see how small an effort she made to conquer this great fault.

Before long Lucy's wrath burst out again. "It was the same in everything. In blindman's-buff I wanted to be blinded first, but Emma said that would not be fair to the others, and that I must wait till my turn came; and then on purpose they tried not to catch me, till at last I went away altogether, and left them to finish their game without me; and it was just the same over again in hunt-the-slipper, and magic-music, and everything we tried. It was the most horrid evening I ever spent, and I never felt so glad to see you before, grandpapa, as when I saw you coming to fetch me away."

Lucy squeezed Mr. Seaton's hand as she spoke, and looked up into his face for sympathy; but he did not return her glance, nor were her little fingers held more tightly than before within his own.

Lucy's account of the afternoon had been in a measure true. The Christmas-

tree had been a failure; blindman's-buff had ended in tears and angry words; magic-music had failed to soothe the angry passions roused; and after a very short trial hunt-the-slipper had been given up in despair. And why? All because one foolish, selfish girl was of the party. One sulky face had spoilt all the fun; one little child's ill-temper had deprived not only herself but all her friends of an afternoon's pleasure.

All this Mr. Seaton understood almost as clearly as if he had been present at the children's party. Some of it he gathered from his own previous experience, the rest from the hurried words of vexation and complaint which fell from Lucy's lips during the remainder of the walk home; and it was with a grave enough face that, on reaching his house, he desired Lucy to run upstairs and take her supper, adding that when his own dinner was

over, she might come down and sit with him for a little before going to bed.

The little girl did as she was desired. Her supper was soon over, and there was some time still to wait before the summons to her grandpapa would reach her. In this lull she began to think over the events of the day more calmly than she had done before. Uncoloured by excitement, the scenes rose up before her one by one, her own ugly conduct showing prominently in them all, till, as the hot flush which had been on her cheek all day began to fade away, and the angry flicker in her eye to die out, she acknowledged to herself what a silly, wilful child she had been.

Mr. Seaton was seated in his arm-chair by the fire as she entered the dining-room, and at the pleasant prospect of a chat with him all other thoughts passed out of Lucy's mind.

"Why, grandpapa," she said, as with one spring she placed herself upon his knee, "you were such a long time, I thought you had forgotten me. Now that I am here, however, I am going to be very happy and comfortable; only, first"—and she kissed him as she spoke—"you must take that grave look off your face, and then I'll stir up the fire, and make a good blaze."

Mr. Seaton returned the kiss, and stroked Lucy's cheek lovingly. "Am I looking grave?" he said; "I did not know it. I was only thinking."

"Thinking—about what? Oh, do tell me," interrupted Lucy, as with a final twist she settled herself more comfortably, in expectation of hearing one of grandpapa's famous stories.

"Tell you what I was thinking of? Well, I will; only to-night, Lucy, instead of a story, I will try to teach you some-

thing—a lesson which some way or other has got mixed up in my mind along with the stories I keep there for my little girl. But first, while I am putting on my considering cap, do you see what you can do to make the fire better than it is."

Lucy got down on to the rug, and began to poke at the sulky coals. It was not a hopeful-looking job, she thought, as the black smoke puffed out into her face, and the one little jet of flame there had been went out with a jump. But still she poked on, and raked the cinders from the lower bar, and with her grandpapa's help put in some pieces of paper very cunningly between the bars.

But it was of no use; the paper blazed up for a moment, and when it went out left the embers looking more dismal than before. The smoke went in heavy dull clouds up the chimney, and the room began to feel very chilly and uncomfortable.

By this time Lucy was quite weary; her cheeks ached with her efforts to kindle a flame by blowing into the fire; she was tired of kneeling on the hard floor, and her fingers were very dirty, and covered with grits.

"Do you give it up, Lucy? Well, you have done your best. Now let me try, and you can watch me," and as he spoke Mr. Seaton took the poker from her hand.

For a long time it seemed as if he were succeeding no better than she had done, as he poked and raked at the ashes perseveringly, and still there was no improvement. But at last he seemed quite satisfied, as, taking up the tongs, he said, "Now, Lucy, it is all right; watch and see what is going to happen."

Lucy stood and looked as though she expected to see some wonderful trick of conjuring, while Mr. Seaton, with some

trouble, drew out from the centre of the fire a piece of dull black slate, and threw it down upon the hearth. Then it did seem almost like conjuring, for, as if glad to be rid of such bad company, the coals began to crackle in chorus, the flames jumped out laughingly from every corner of the grate to meet one another, and in a few minutes Lucy's cheeks were being toasted by the hot fire which was burning before her.

"That is splendid!" she cried exultingly. "Why, grandpapa, how clever you were to manage that, and to find out that sulky old slate! But who could ever think," she continued, "that one little slate could do so much mischief?"

"Who indeed?" replied Mr. Seaton, returning to his arm-chair, and drawing her towards him. "But do you know, little girl, it is getting so late, it is almost time for bed?"

"No, no, not yet; please not yet—at least, not till you tell me what the lesson is you want me to learn. I need not go till you have told me that."

"Well, then, here it is," said Mr. Seaton slowly; "I want my little Lucy to learn that a slate in the fire is a very nasty, uncomfortable thing, and that she will have to try not to turn into one."

"Me, grandpapa! How can I be like a slate, except indeed my fingers?" she continued, looking ruefully at the grimy fingers, and proceeding to wipe them on the sleeve of her grandpapa's coat.

"I will explain to you what I mean," he said. "You have just seen the way one little piece of slate could make this whole fire black, ugly, and useless, and you saw how brightly things went when it was taken away. Well," he continued, looking straight into Lucy's face, "I saw to-day a whole party of merry, happy little girls

—or, at least, a party that should have been both merry and happy—made dull, melancholy, and completely wretched, all because one little girl was among them, putting out the bright fire of happiness with the ugly slate, which is made up of selfishness and ill-temper.

"I do not think I need mention the name of this little girl," he continued very kindly, as Lucy threw her arms round his neck, and burst into tears. "I think my darling knows all about it now, and can understand for herself what my lesson is. Yes, the Hargroves asked you to spend the afternoon with them, that you might all be happy together; but their cheerfulness was extinguished, their pleasure spoilt, because this discontented little spirit was among them, making them all miserable. Am I wrong in this? Ought the blame of to-day's misfortunes to be laid to Flora's account or yours?"

"It was my fault; I know it was, and I am so sorry. I did not think about making them unhappy."

"I am sure you did not think; but remember, Lucy, even a child such as you are can make a great difference in the happiness of those around her. You are very young, and sometimes very foolish too; but when you try, no one can be a pleasanter companion than you can. I have often called you my little sunbeam. I hope I may never have to say, or that other people may have to say, that you are like an ugly slate."

And then Mr. Seaton showed Lucy how Christ likes His little ones to be gentle, kind, and loving to one another. And by degrees she earned the right to be called a sunbeam by all her friends, and no thought of her being like an ugly black slate ever entered into their minds.

THE PEAT MAKERS.

ONE beautiful, bright May morning, Jane and Alfred Macgregor came running to their father as soon as they saw him on the garden seat. Little Jane, climbing up on his knee, asked for a story, "for we are tired of play."

"Tired of play!" exclaimed her father; "that is strange. Come, then, if you like, and I will tell you about a day very long ago that I was just thinking of when you two came running here."

"That will do, papa," cried Alfred; "I always like to hear about when you were a boy."

"Ah, well," said Mr. Macgregor, "when I was a boy I lived in a very different country from this. I was born in a curious old manse, in the extreme north of Scotland, and close to the sea. This tree that we are sitting under would have been thought very wonderful there. We were surrounded by great mountains, and mighty rocks, and long miles of beautiful yellow sands, which were the delight of my brothers and sisters; but trees we had none—indeed nothing bigger than gooseberry bushes. As we had no trees, of course we had no wood to burn; and as coal had to be brought from a very great distance, people used as little of it as possible, and were content with the peats, which could be had close at hand. So the cutting and making of peats for the winter was one of the most important works of the summer.

"It was always the custom for the people to appoint a day, in which a

sufficient number of them, about sixty or seventy, would meet together to make the peats for us at the manse; and it was always a day of great delight to us children, but of toil enough to the others.

"A day or two before, Rory, the beadle, would go round and tell the appointed day for the 'minister's peats;' while at the manse a calf would be killed, and a good supply of beef be provided.

"When the day came, about eight o'clock numbers of little maidens would be seen coming towards our house with pitchers of milk from the farm-houses; and some of their mothers would come to help in preparing food for the workers.

"First, a large ten-gallon pot was put on the fire with porridge, stirred in turn by the women with the handle of a flail.

"Long tables were spread out, and as the men and women who were going to the moor came in they seated themselves

at the tables, and got as much porridge and milk as they chose.

"The moor was about two miles away from our house. At twelve o'clock luncheon was sent up to the workers, the servants carrying baskets full of oat-cake, cheese, and other things. But dinner was the great event of the day. At two o'clock a cart was loaded with churns full of nice broth, a great quantity of cold meat, plates, knives, forks, and spoons. Also a small table-cloth, and a plate, etc., for your grandfather, who always went about this time to the moor. When the cart was seen coming, the people all hastened to some of the clear springs of water to wash their faces and hands. When they were seated comfortably on the hillside your grandfather asked a blessing, and then the dinner began to be served out to the people. If we children were good we were always allowed

to go with the cart, and help in the many ways that good little children can.

"Grandpapa did not remain very long; but we were allowed to stay as long as we liked—that is to say, as long as we were happy and good."

"But, papa," said Alfred, "you have told us a great deal about the feeding of the people. I should like to know how they made the peats."

"It was a very pretty sight to see them at work on the moor," said Mr. Macgregor; "everything was done in such regular order. First one set of workers, with large spades, divided the sod, or lined out the ground, as it was called. Then another set, with a different kind of instrument, called a flaughter spade, removed the sod, so as to reach the peat-moss which lay beneath.

"Then some of the women came and threw the peats up into heaps, which

were in this way cut out and prepared; and another set of women went to these heaps, and, separating each peat, spread them out in rows to dry in the sun. Generally all was done merrily and happily, but sometimes the younger workers would begin to pelt each other with peats, as schoolboys do with snowballs. The good-natured ones would laugh when they felt themselves battered on all sides with the peats; but some would get angry, and a regular fight would end what was only meant to be a piece of fun.

"When their work was done, the people began again to troop to the manse, and before they left each got a large supply of what is called sowens, out of the ten-gallon pot, which they ate with milk, just as you do porridge. Then bidding us all good-bye, and hoping that the peats would be good, the old people would go home, tired enough, I

daresay; but the young ones would end the day with football, or throwing the stone, or running races on the sands."

"I wish we had peats, papa," said little Jane, "and a day of making them. There is no fun in getting carts of coal."

"But the ugly black coal is much the better of the two," said her papa; "and some day I must tell you something about its history; but you have listened long enough now. Let me see which of you will reach the gate first."

And off the little children ran, eager for play again; and little Jane won the race, for Alfred had not tied his shoe, and tripping on the string, he fell upon the soft, green grass.

THE END.

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